Commentary Nr 3 2026

The EU's new Arctic strategy:

How can the Union be an effective security actor in the North?

Helmi Rantala

26 October

Summary

The European Commission will shortly publish the European Union's new Arctic Strategy. With the new strategy, the EU is specifically aiming to position itself as an Arctic security actor, marking a shift from its previous regional engagement. As the Arctic is experiencing increased geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, the EU's regional effectiveness will ultimately depend on political willingness to allocate money and time. As an Arctic security actor, the EU can be a regional security enabler that commits the necessary financial resources to security priorities in the region and builds the kind of international partnerships that enhance security and deterrence.



Helmi Rantala
Analyst at the Arctic & High North Programme at UI.

Commentary

The European Commission will shortly publish the European Union's new Arctic Strategy. Both the Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs, Kaja Kallas, have indicated that this Strategy will focus more on security than did the previous one from 2021. To date, the EU's Arctic policy has focused more on environmental and climate issues, sustainable development, and cooperation. While the 2026 Strategy will not be about security exclusively, the new attention to this dimension represents an important shift in the Union's approach to the Arctic.

The new policy comes at a time when the previous geopolitical framing of the Arctic as a region of "high North, low tensions" has been overtaken by a growing regional security confrontation triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its military investments in the Arctic region, and the subsequent decision of EU Member States Sweden and Finland, both Arctic states, to join NATO. At the same time, growing interest in the Arctic on the part of non-Arctic states, notably China, is spurring wider changes as the region opens to intensified economic activities and new transportation routes, leading to increased risks of environmental crises, accidents, and military confrontation. In early 2026, President Trump's threats to seize Greenland by force exacerbated concerns about security in the Arctic. Meanwhile, climate change is creating everyday challenges to the safety and security of the Arctic EU countries.

Growing regional instability has challenged the established Arctic governance framework, principally the centrality of the Arctic Council, which is currently struggling to function on the political level. In this context, the EU is attempting to step up its regional security role. Arctic Member States have sought to increase the Union's attention to the region. For the Union, interests in the Arctic include natural resources in Northern Sweden and Finland, mainly critical minerals necessary for the EU to strengthen its strategic autonomy. Northern Europe's renewable energy and advanced technologies for the green transition are also seen as supporting the EU's climate and competitiveness goals. In addition, the EU has identified northern transportation routes as important for continent-wide supply chains.

While the EU is seeking to enhance its Arctic security role, national capitals have signalled that the Union should not seek to duplicate existing security activities conducted by Member States and by NATO. The EU is not a direct military security actor but works with tools such as sanctions and investments. The EU is therefore likely to pursue a role for itself through the strategy of being an "enabler". The EU's new focus on Arctic threats will build on its existing policies in areas traditionally seen as "soft" security, such as climate, housing, and research, which are increasingly interlinked with military security and societal resilience in the Arctic. On top of this, Arctic security can be promoted through the EU's strengths, for example, in terms of its capacities to mobilize significant financial resources for investments in regional (i.e., dual-use) infrastructure, and through the EU's regulations affecting military mobility. The Strategy is also likely to commit the EU to a stronger role in combating hybrid threats and threats to critical Arctic infrastructure.

The forthcoming EU Arctic Strategy will thus mark new level of ambition for the Union in the region, but whether the EU becomes a significant security actor depends on its subsequently "walking the walk" concerning Arctic security. The EU's previous Arctic policy has been criticized for being more of a collection of ongoing activities

rather than articulating strategic engagement in the region. At a time when the number of actors in the Arctic is increasing, cooperation is being challenged, and climate and security threats are becoming acute, if the EU is to become an Arctic security actor, it will have to demonstrate that it can move from strategy to effective action. To achieve this, it must demonstrate progress in three main areas.

First, while it will likely be difficult for the EU to commit new funding directly to the Arctic Strategy, as the EU is at the end of its current budget term and the new budget has yet to be agreed on for 2028–2034, as a security enabler, money is where the EU's power is. While the Union might not buy icebreakers as Finland's Prime Minister Orpo has suggested, it will need to demonstrate that it can facilitate investment in the region's critical infrastructure to promote resilience and support security. Regional and national actors in Sweden and Finland have voiced their concern that funding for sparsely populated northern areas risks being cut in the new EU budget as other issues are prioritized. While one should not expect a dedicated Arctic budget line, if the EU is to be a significant regional security actor, it must be able to point to clear investment commitments to Northern Europe in the areas of research, infrastructure, and other Arctic-relevant areas within the future EU budget.

Second, in addition to ensuring budget support for Arctic security initiatives, the new Strategy should be tied to ongoing frameworks and developments such as the new European Security Strategy (ESS), the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), and the EU's space agendain order for it not to become a one-off initiative. By tying the Strategy to the Union's existing initiatives, a European Arctic mindset or even identity could be developed over time, which is a requirement for the EU to be a serious Arctic security actor.

The EU should aim to offer concrete practical support to its Member States in areas where the EU's voice weighs more than those of the individual States. At its best, the EU can be more than the sum of its Arctic members, elevating neglected areas above the national decision-making level, areas that other organizations, such as NATO and the Arctic Council, are not already addressing. As a powerful economic actor, the EU should tie its new Arctic security ambitions to, for example, economic security tools such as diversifying energy resources and improving capabilities to respond to cyber-attacks in the Arctic.

Finally, for the EU to become an Arctic security actor, rather than a just a Northern European one, the new Strategy should indicate how the Union can form effective Arctic security partnerships with non-EU Arctic states, such as Canada and the USA, non-Arctic allies such as the UK, and the European Economic Area Arctic partners Norway and Iceland. While there are existing frameworks such as NATO for military security, there is room for EU/bilateral cooperation, especially in areas such as economic security and countering hybrid threats. The immediate priority will be to chart a course for closer cooperation with Canada regarding Arctic security via initiatives such as the EU–Canada Security and Defence Partnership, signed in 2025. This Arctic security agenda needs to demonstrate practical developments in areas such as space security, the climate–security nexus, and maritime security, all of which are key in the Arctic, especially at a moment when the USA has become a more unstable partner.

To conclude, while the Arctic Strategy represents an important upgrade of the EU's regional role, its real consequences for Arctic security remain to be seen in the upcoming budget. They will need to be evidenced in the Union's ability to add value to aspects of Arctic security that have not received the necessary attention, and in forming and enhancing not just political, but practical partnerships. The EU is conventionally most effective in large-scale and long-term processes, but in the Arctic, the Union must act quickly to respond to climate warming and address immediate security threats in the region. How well the EU succeeds in being an Arctic security enabler to meet these challenges will be the measure of success for the new Strategy.

UI's publications undergo internal quality control. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

Language editing: Proper English AB

Commentary Nr 3 2026

About UI

Established in 1938, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent research institute on foreign affairs and international relations. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field. Copyright of this publication is held by UI. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and noncommercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of UI.

The Swedish Institute of International Affairs
Visiting Address: Amiralitetsbacken 1, 111 49 Stockholm
Postal Address: Box 3163, 103 63 Stockholm
Phone: +46 8 511 768 00
www.ui.se | info@ui.se | X: @UISweden

Utrikespolitiska institutet